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Thursday, February 10, 2005

## Frankfort's handouts

Just a few days into the 2005 session of the Kentucky General Assembly, and the priorities are already off track.

The House of Representatives has voted 92-0 to put \$114 million in tobacco farmers' pockets, and Gov. Ernie Fletcher's tax "modernization" plan includes a provision to give \$14 million to horse breeders.

Of course, the farmers and breeders believe they're deserving. But considering the tough times Kentucky is experiencing, lawmakers should know better than to put them at the top of the list.

Are these new subsidies really the best use of so much public money? No. Especially since both programs are structured to mostly benefit the bigger farmers and breeders, who are capable of surviving quite nicely without taxpayer help.

And especially considering who is not getting help. Kentucky's Medicaid chief, for instance, warns that even after introducing almost \$300 million in efficiencies, the health care program for the poor and disabled will still fall about \$245 million short next year.

And while the state's economic future absolutely depends on a better educated workforce, schools are low on the priority list, too.

Inadequate state funding just forced the University of Kentucky to announce a double-digit tuition increase. At the other end of the spectrum, 76 school districts still don't offer the full-day kindergarten that Kentucky's education commissioner says is the best investment possible. Shouldn't that investment come first?

Kentucky lawmakers have a long history of being unable to say "no" to tobacco farmers, but they should find it easier this time. The farmers are asking too much.

They're angry that their expected Phase II tobacco settlement payment from tobacco



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companies will be either denied or delayed because of a court battle. But that doesn't mean taxpayers should "make them whole," as the farmers are demanding.

After all, the reason the Phase II payment may disappear is that Congress agreed to a big tobacco buyout worth \$10 billion. Come spring, the money will start flowing again to the farmers. But not to pre-school programs, technical training, health care research, care for the elderly or therapy for the autistic.

Lawmakers should say "no" to the horse breeders, too. By every measure, Kentucky remains the horse capital of the world, despite the scare stories about the last two Kentucky Derby winners coming from New York and Pennsylvania.

There's little evidence a breeders program here would be worth the cost anyway. Quality is what will count in the future, and in Florida, the quality of horses has declined since that state's incentive program began three decades ago. Besides, the big money would go to the big breeders. It makes no sense today to ask taxpayers to start subsidizing the Bluegrass aristocracy.

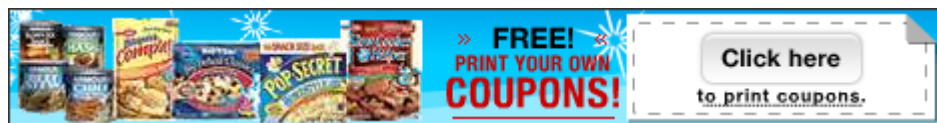
Of course, lawmakers hate to say "no" to even the undeserving. It's the most dreaded word in the vocabulary of anyone hoping to be re-elected.

But after all the rhetoric about the need to set smart priorities and make hard decisions, it's time to do both.

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